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AUTHOR Wigfield, Jack
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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the tone systems of Vietnamese and English, with emphasis on the teaching of English as a second language. Rising, level, high, low, and falling tones are identified for English. Vietnamese has all of these except the last. While in Vietnamese, tones are predictable in the sense that tones and words go together, English tones vary and have more than a lexical function. It is thus quite difficult to teach the placement of tones in English. A method of taking the Vietnamese tone markers from Vietnamese words and applying them to words in the target language is outlined, as a means of teaching tone in English. Comments are made about tone usage in different regional varieties of Vietnamese. (CLK)

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TONES IN VIETNAMESE AND ENGLISH

Jack Wigfield
Alemany Community College Education Center
San Francisco

Vietnamese has tones. English has tones, too. Consider these sentences:

- | I | II |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1: He went downtown. | 1: He went downtown. |
| 2: Where? (rising tone=repeat) | 2: Where? (falling tone=new information) |
| 1: Downtown. | 1: To Macy's. |

English tones are usually considered on the level of the sentence. But the tone contrasts are similar to Saigon Vietnamese. Consider these tones in the two languages:

English	Vietnamese
1. rising (Where? = Repeat)	mái (go on and on)
2. level (I like...)	mai (tomorrow)
3. high (English)	má (mother)
4. low (English)	mà (but)
5. High falling (Yes)	---

Notice that Saigon Vietnamese has all of the tonal contrasts in English except the high falling tone. You'll have to teach your students that one. The rest are no problem.

But this is only the beginning. The Vietnamese know where to put Vietnamese tones. The tone and the word go together. English tones vary. They have more than a lexical function. How then do you teach the placement of tone in English? You don't know? Relax. Nobody does. All we can do is let people listen a lot to English tones. Their language learning device is capable of formulating, in most instances, the right tone rule. How do they do it? We don't know yet.

But we can help the Vietnamese learner. Remember, however, that the following ideas are not a substitute for you in the classroom. They are meant to

aid your students when you are not present.

Notice above that the Vietnamese written word carries a tone marker. Just as spoken pitch is part of the spoken word, the tone marker is a part of the written word. Let's now take the Vietnamese tone marker from his language and apply it to the language he's studying. Consider these dialogues:

1. a: What do you think of me?

b: I like you.

2. a: Who likes me?

b: I like you.

3. a: Who do you like?

b: I like you⁺.

Notice that only in 3:b have we had to invent a new symbol. Since Vietnamese doesn't have a falling tone, we've used + to show a high-falling pitch or tone. Don't worry too much about that high-falling tone, either. John Ohala of the phonetics laboratory at U.C. Berkely has good evidence that many if not most speakers use a low pitch rather than a high-falling in many instances. For example:

3. a: Who do you like?

b. I like you.

This level to low tone might sound much more natural to many of you. High-falling tone does occur, however, and you'll have to teach it.

The unmarked level tone is especially convenient for English since much of our allegro to fast speech is on a level tone. It will also help point up the location of many of our non-level tones as being near the end of sentences.

Here is an example to show you how a dialogue can be marked. It's contrasted with the type of marking that is used in the University of Michigan's English Language Institute series.

1: Where are you going?

1: Where are you going?

2: Now?

2: Now?

1: No. Tomorrow.

1: No. Tomorrow.

2: I don't know, yet.

2: I don't know, yet.

1: Ok. Let me know when you do.

1: Ok. Let me know when you do.

2: Ok.

2: Ok.

Just a few added comments. Hanoi dialect has one more tone that Saigon Vietnamese. Central or Hue dialect is even more different. Both Hanoi and Saigon speakers use this tone mark for a low-rising tone [?]. If you use this tone marker [?], it will be OK for Saigon speakers, but your Hanoi speakers will give you something you don't want in English.

If you want to be ultra experimental, you can use a further Saigon Vietnamese tone in English. It's a low rising tone.* It's marked with a dot under the word. For example: ma (rice seedling). You can use it in sentences like this:

He tr^íed it, but he didn't lí^íke it.

One more thing. Don't expect your Vietnamese students to accept this system immediately. They'll probably balk as my very linguistically sophisticated Faculty of Pedagogy students did. After a while, they may see it as a very helpful tool, as my students eventually did.

* The description of this tone varies. My data agrees with Eleanor Jorden and her FSI colleagues who state "This tone starts approximately where (ma) ends, falls and then rises abruptly..." (Vietnamese, 1967). Laurence Thompson described it as "low non-falling" in 1959 in Language and as "low dropping" in his A Vietnamese Grammar in 1965. There is a great deal of dialect variation and this might account for differing descriptions and there might also be a sound change taking place. My present students just arrived from Vietnam living north of Saigon favor Thompson's 1965 description. But an older student contests their pronunciation as sub-standard and uses Jorden's low rise.